REVIEW ESSAY

Spectrums of Oppression
Gender and Sexuality during the Cold War

Marko Dumančić


Over the past 25 years, Cold War studies have cross-fertilized with gender and sexuality studies to establish a productive symbiosis, which continues to enrich all these fields. This interaction has evolved in two complementary directions. First, scholars have explored the profound ways in which Cold War politics, economics, and culture transformed postwar gender ideals and practices on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Although much of this work has focused on the U.S. context, the past decade has witnessed a marked increase in research illuminating gendered experiences in the Soviet Union and the two Germanys.¹ Because much of this scholarship emphasizes the centrality of the home (and the kitchen space in particular), the twin concepts of domesticity and consumerism have come to dominate analyses of Cold War–era gender transformations. A focus on domesticity and consumerism as inter- and intra-bloc phenomena has allowed scholars to establish comparative links that illuminate the transnational nature of the Cold War. As a result of this approach,

we can better appreciate how the transnational character of the Cold War affected gender experiences on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

If works analyzing the Cold War rivalry’s effect on gender ideals and practices have focused mostly on domestic life and femininity, studies of how gender norms have shaped the evolution of the Cold War concentrate on the influence of masculinity. As such, they constitute the second trend bringing gender and Cold War studies into a symbiotic relationship. K. A. Cuordileone, Suzanne Clark, Robert D. Dean, and Michael Davidson, for instance, collectively demonstrate that elite masculine subcultures constituted a central element of political and cultural life, especially in foreign policy and high culture. Rather than illustrate how the superpower standoff affected the social and discursive practices of gender, these authors demonstrate that widespread Cold War–era anxieties concerning gender, sexuality, and the male self directly affected governmental policy. From this perspective, cultural fears related to the loss of masculine virility led to severe anti-Communist policies and narrowed the policymakers’ options in shaping domestic and foreign policies. Dean, for instance, observes: “Gender, sexuality, and the production and control of sexual secrets played a central role in many political struggles of the Red Scare era.” Both Cuordileone’s and Dean’s work demonstrate how the ever-toughening line on Communism and the accompanying virulent homophobia forced elite men of liberal and leftist leanings (especially those in charge of federal governmental agencies) to renounce internationalism and moderation. They adapted to the exclusivist positions of the political right by not only externalizing stereotypically masculine features (such as stoicism, aggressiveness, and exclusive group loyalty) but by translating those traits into core elements of the nation’s foreign policy. As Dean points out, Kennedy and his new brand of “warrior intellectuals” adapted to the exigencies of Cold War hypermasculine gendering so well that they made disastrous choices dur-

2. This is not to say that studies of Cold War domesticity have neglected to examine masculinity. Several books, including James Gilbert’s *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s*, Steven Cohan’s *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*, and Mike Chopra-Grant’s *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir*, have demonstrated that the paradoxical mix of militaristic and domestic demands on postwar manliness led to the proliferation of roles for men that destabilized hegemonic heterosexual manliness.


ing the Vietnam War. Cold War hypermasculinity turned those advocating for moderation or compromise into men incapable of fulfilling their patriotic and gender duties. These phenomena were not limited to the international political realm. In his book on the outwardly progressive and revolutionary American poets, Davidson contends: “even within the most progressive communities—homosexual or heterosexual—forms of misogyny and homophobia are often necessary to their continuation.” Clark echoes Davidson’s position when she advances the idea that, although “intellectuals turned away from heroics and extremity to a more tragic sense of history and to a poetics of ambiguity,” they nonetheless “shared the claim to a position of transcendental objectivity that characterized the hypermasculinity of national policy.” Arguments about the decisive impact of a hypermasculine worldview on Cold War high culture and politics remain largely limited to the U.S. context, however. East European and Soviet political and cultural elites have not been analyzed from this vantage point.

Scholarship on postwar sexuality organically enhances the two directions evident in Cold War gender studies because widespread homophobia defined the framework for publicly sanctioned gender roles. Historicizing the postwar Lavender Scare has proven indispensable to contextualizing the evolution of both postwar femininity through Cold War domesticity and Cold War foreign policy/high culture through the lens of elite masculinity. David K. Johnson and Robert Corber, for instance, show that the homophobia of the period profoundly affected concepts of gender ideals by complicating the notion that one’s sex-object choice would be readily apparent through an inverted gender performance: gay men would externalize feminine behavior, whereas gay women would behave in a masculine fashion. The fear that homosexuals cannot be detected solely from a caricaturishly “inverted” performance of gender roles went hand in hand with the era’s obsession with Communist infiltration and subversion. In that sense, Cold War paranoia about external Communist enemies and internal homosexual threats closely mirrored and reinforced each other. At the same time, as both Johnson and Corber point out, the persecution of homosexuals on the one hand, and insistence that they become culturally invisible on the other, paradoxically led to gay subculture becoming increasingly cohesive and vocal long before the 1969 Stonewall riots. Such a

narrative is, however, still restricted to scholarship dealing with the U.S. and Western European context, where discussions about homosexuality, no matter how condemnatory and repressive, gradually allowed sexual minorities to shape their own public identity. Because homosexuality was a topic rarely invoked in public throughout much of Eastern Europe (East Germany of the 1970s being the notable exception), East-bloc popular culture did not produce an equivalent to the paranoid discourse on the “velvet scare” or “hom-intern” conspiracies. This is not to say that homosexual subcultures did not exist or that the urban populations of Eastern Europe could claim ignorance of non-heteronormative sexual cultures (especially after the heady interwar years). This awareness, however, did not lead to public deliberation on the position of homosexuals in society. Even when individual in Eastern Europe thought about homosexuality, their lips remained sealed.

The three books under review here reaffirm the prevailing trends in Cold War gender and sexuality studies and break new ground in two principal ways. First, all three books confirm that during the 1950s and 1960s the liminal and ambiguous aspects of gender and sexuality loomed large in public consciousness. These two decades emerge as periods of contradiction, decades when nonconformist gender performances and sexual identities created a vibrant subversive language that helped offset Hollywood's repressive Production Code, Berlin's policing mechanisms, and America's panicked discourse about a worldwide gay conspiracy. Although repression of non-normative, alternative identities remained a fact of life, it does not reveal the totality of the Cold War experience. Cold War culture emerges as a complex system in which fissures and breaks are as pronounced as the demand for uniformity and control. By demonstrating the simultaneous rigidity and fluidity of Cold War culture through analyses of gender and sexuality, these books augment an established trajectory in Cold War sexuality studies and the character of Cold War culture more broadly.

Second, all three books concern themselves with the question of visibility and the extent to which postwar homophobia facilitated attempts by “the love that dared not speak its name” to make itself heard after all. Sherry's and Corber's books focus on how American anti-Communist rhetoric affected the representation of gay men and lesbian women, whereas Evans explains how Berlin's scarred postwar cityscape acted simultaneously as an autonomous, restrictive, and repressive zone for the erotic activities of its various denizens, both homosexual and heterosexual. Collectively, the three books paint the first two decades of the Cold War as formative for the queer community’s

sense of group identity. In that sense, these monographs follow and extend George Chauncey’s call to reformulate the narrative of gay history prior to the emergence of the gay rights movement, which commenced with the 1969 Stonewall riots. Like Chauncey, these authors show that even in the darkest moments of Cold War homophobia, the concept of “the closet” did not define the gay community. Without denying the realities of suppression, the authors make an excellent case for historicizing Cold War homophobia. Pre-Stonewall Cold War queer history thus emerges as rich with unexamined documents testifying to the vibrancy of gay culture. The Cold War defined queer communities not only as scapegoats but also as active participants—even as Cold War regulatory systems profoundly circumscribed the agency of queer actors.

Corber’s *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema* constitutes a thought-provoking examination of how the logic of Cold War culture framed, shaped, and gave voice to popular conceptions about women’s gender roles. Specifically, it illustrates how Hollywood made lesbian identities visible at a time when both the Production Code and the adversarial attitude toward feminist politics conspired to hide lesbian characters. The code’s insistence that any references, no matter how subtle, to “sexual perversion” were not to be tolerated (or, after 1961, were to be handled with “care, discretion, and restraint”) dovetailed with the widespread conviction that “the very survival of American democracy depended on the reproduction of normative gender and sexual identities” (p. 12). To the conservatively minded, the gradual gains women had experienced in the social and economic sphere since the 1920s had begun to undermine the democratic experiment. The fear that women no longer dedicated themselves fully to the domestic sphere evoked panic about children being denied the opportunity to “develop the emotional maturity to exercise their citizenship responsibly” (p. 11). Perhaps unsurprisingly, in this context lesbianism became a particularly charged symbol of the broader concern regarding feminism’s impact on traditional gender hierarchies. For instance, Jess Stearn, an associate editor of *Newsweek*, argued in *The Grapevine*, his best-selling 1965 exposé on the lesbian underworld, that lesbianism represented “only one phase of the continuing drive of women all over to share a place in the sun with the male” (p. 12).

In addition to representing a threat to the established heteronormative patriarchal order, the lesbian also threatened America’s standing in the Cold War rivalry. The femme, the lesbian who, despite her same-sex object choice, conformed to stereotypically feminine behavior, posed a particular problem in a Cold War culture obsessed with detecting fifth-columnists, fellow travelers, and moles. Unlike the butch, the femme’s same-sex desire was not evident in her gender presentation, and this made her exceedingly dangerous. As Corber
contends, “The Cold War discourse of female homosexuality reduced the femme’s femininity to a kind of disguise that allowed her to participate in American society while escaping detection” (p. 19). Not coincidentally did Alfred Kinsey’s reports on male (1948) and female (1953) sexuality, which confirmed that “inversion and homosexuality are two distinct and not always correlated types of behavior,” emerge as the Senate Appropriations Committee committed itself to ferreting out homosexuals and “other sex perverts” from government employment (p. 30). Popular culture confirmed and buttressed the government’s paranoia. The title of Stearn’s bestseller conveyed the idea that lesbians had formed a “vast, sprawling grapevine, with a secret code of its own” because they had successfully disguised their aberrant sexuality. As a result of Cold War anxieties, sexual attraction to other women, rather than the externalization of masculine identity, became the basis of lesbian identity.

The 1950s and 1960s discourse on lesbianism, charged and panicked as it was, nonetheless faced obstacles in representing the lesbian. Because the Production Code forbade mention of “sexual perversion” on the silver screen and because Cold War paranoia focused more on lesbians who passed as heterosexual women, it became difficult to make homosexuality visible to audiences. Directors could neither screen the butch openly on account of the Production Code nor make the femme visible, because Cold War paranoia had made her illegible. Corber’s work thus ingeniously excavates the invisible Cold War femme and uncovers the strategies devised by Hollywood filmmakers to make the lesbian persona legible to the moviegoer. He concludes that with the appearance of the “invisible” femme, the older, butch, model of sexuality “never wholly disappeared but continued to shape popular conceptions of perverse female desire.” Corber demonstrates that in order to neutralize the femme and the invisible threat she posed to the heterosexist order, scriptwriters and filmmakers had to rely on the older model, wherein female masculinity marked female autonomy (and any type of homosocial relations between women) as pathological.

Hollywood’s two conflicting discourses of lesbianism resulted in female femininity emerging “as a powerfully ambiguous signifier of sexual identity” (p. 5). The Hollywood films simultaneously added to the existing homophobia and “pathologized women’s desire for freedom and independence” (p. 19). At the same time, by privileging the femme over the butch, the Cold War construction of the lesbian paradoxically and “inadvertently highlighted the mobility of sex, gender, and sexuality in relation to each other” (p. 29). Put simply, during the 1950s and 1960s gender identity, object choice, and sexual practice failed to line up neatly because of the Cold War discourse on the femme. To best elucidate this complex process, Corber ingeniously examines changes in films’ remakes and places specific films within a filmmaker’s or an
actress’s broader oeuvre. With this comparative approach, Corber successfully shows that the Cold War logic structured gender and sexuality relations in an idiosyncratic fashion and produced unexpected consequences.

Corber develops his thesis in two sections. In the first, he examines three Hollywood classics—Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *All about Eve* (1950), William Wyler’s *The Children’s Hour* (1961), and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964)—and provides new insights into these much-studied works. The three films point to how Hollywood shaped discursive and visual strategies to talk about lesbianism during the Cold War while reflecting discomfort about female homosocial institutions and practices. Corber contends that *All about Eve*—long considered a camp classic—ought also to be understood as a Cold War film because it “underwrites and legitimates Cold War ideologies, especially those regulating the construction of gender and sexual identities” (p. 29). Through the title character, Mankiewicz attempts to show that “Eve’s performance of femininity disguised an identification with masculinity” but “surfaced in her ambition and focus on her career” (p. 30). Eve’s obsession with theater superstar Margo Channing (Bette Davis) and Margo’s career undermines Eve’s attempt to hide her aberrant sexual desire behind a veneer of artificially feminized gender performance. Mankiewicz makes clear from the start that everything about Eve—including her gender performance—lacks authenticity. In order to gain access to Margo’s circle, she lies about being the widow of a deceased Air Force pilot, hides her professional ambition with demure passivity, and pretends that her interest in Margo is purely platonic. Once in Margo’s circle, Eve continues to study and mimic everything about Margo with the intention of not only superseding her idol but also learning how to pass as a heterosexual woman.

If Mankiewicz pathologizes Eve’s obsession with success on the stage and codes professional ambition as lesbian, then Margo, as an unmarried and successful career woman, also rejects her feminine role and responsibilities. Even Margo’s femininity appears to be histrionic and performative: true femininity would emerge from fulfilling marital and procreative duties. As a result, Margo, who is supposed to be Eve’s victim and foil simultaneously, emerges as ideologically problematic. To resolve this tension, Mankiewicz provides Margo with a monologue in which she renounces the trappings of a prominent career and accepts the “common womanly lot.” Only through such didacticism can Mankiewicz make Margo unambiguously heterosexual and find a way out of the paradox the Cold War discourse on sexuality imposes. Margo declares, “Funny business, a woman’s career. The things you drop on your way up the ladder so you can move faster. You forget you’ll need them again when you get back to being a woman.” The doyenne of the stage regrets her unhealthy preoccupation with fame because it has prevented her from estab-
lishing a marital life. She proclaims, “What is being a woman all about? Getting a man, because without a man, a woman is not really a woman” (p. 42). Although Margo’s monologue is supposed to reinforce the notion that sexual-object choice, rather than gender performance alone, distinguishes a heterosexual woman from a homosexual one, Corber argues that Mankiewicz comes up short. At the end of the film, it remains unclear whether Margo gave up her successful career or committed to marital bliss in a normative manner. If a connection with a man is the only thing separating a heterosexual woman from a homosexual one, then a fine line separates Margo from Eve. Both characters can pass for straight, although Eve’s core identity is made a shade more masculine because she refuses to tie herself to a man. In this sense All about Eve effectively demonstrates that although the Cold War discourse of lesbianism aimed to displace the stereotype of the mannish lesbian, the stereotype did not disappear insofar as “the butch continued to be seen as more lesbian than the femme” (p. 47). Moreover, the femme persona created more complications and questions than it solved, even broadening the possibilities for transgressing the normative framework.

In the second part of the book, Corber shows how the careers and casting histories of three of Hollywood’s major female stars—Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, and Doris Day—can reveal the evolution of attitudes toward lesbianism and female independence. The career trajectory of all three actresses was profoundly affected by the fear of the femme’s invisibility. The roles these stars performed during the Cold War articulated the limits of female independence. Crawford, whose persona was defined by the interplay of masculine resolve and feminine grace, achieved a particular dimension during the Cold War. While Crawford played independent, self-made heroines, in both Depression-era and Cold War films, in the latter period her ambiguous femininity appeared anachronistic and out of place. As Corber avers: “Whereas the movies Crawford made during the Depression represented such women as admirable and worthy of emulation so long as they simultaneously embodied an alluring femininity, the ones she made in the 1950s characterized such women as shrewish and emasculating” (p. 101). Even though Crawford’s signature padded shoulders made her glamorous and alluring in the 1930s and 1940s, the Cold War atmosphere rendered her masculinized shoulders campy.

The Cold War logic shaped Davis’s and Day’s careers, roles, and public images as much as it did Crawford’s, albeit in idiosyncratic ways. Corber points to how Cold War feature films aimed to revise Davis’s problematic positioning vis-à-vis the institutions of motherhood and female intimacy. Whereas the 1940s motion pictures featuring Davis demonstrated the possibility of alternative womanhood centered on homosocial partnerships, her Cold War–era films reinstated marriage as the only permissible goal of female
sexual development. Robert Aldrich’s 1962 classic *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* stands as an unambiguous renunciation of Davis’s prewar features, in which homosocial relationships are not only possible but desirable. Aldrich contains Davis’s previous image by, as Corber puts it, “transforming the type of woman’s picture the star made during the heyday of her career into a horror movie” (p. 133). In Aldrich’s nightmarish scenario, Davis and Crawford play two sisters trapped in a decaying household and facing each other in a ghoulish life-or-death struggle.

Day, whose gender identity was closely identified with her tomboyishness, mirrored the process Crawford and Davis underwent, but in reverse. Despite her old-fashioned, girl-next-door persona, Day became glamorized to the point that she came to symbolize the cornerstone of an alluring postwar maidenhood, most famously on display in Michael Gordon’s 1959 romance classic, *Pillow Talk*. While careful to uncover the multiple ways in which the pronounced masculine elements of Day’s performance transgressed postwar sexual and gender normativity, Corber concludes that the increasing accentuation of her characters’ wholesomeness worked to ratify, rather than challenge, Cold War norms.

As David Greven points out in his review of *Cold War Femme*, Corber interprets the films with the express purpose of fitting these cinematic texts within a paradigm of Cold War homophobia. In Greven’s view, Corber “renders aesthetic texts indistinguishable from the social and cultural documents in the eras from which they emerge.”10 The provocative analysis Corber offers elides the question of agency. At times Corber deprives the historical protagonists of their agency. Directors and scriptwriters often appear as little more than agents and enforcers of Cold War homophobia. Corber argues that tensions and contradictions defined the Cold War discourse on lesbianism, but it seems plausible that sociopolitical processes unrelated to the superpower conflict also played a part in making the discourse on lesbianism unstable. Could the ambivalent endings and ambiguous heroines of that era’s films reflect more than Cold War homophobia? The question of whether the films and silver screen stars Corber investigates represent the totality of the Cold War—era experience remains open.

Michael S. Sherry’s *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* masterfully investigates how gay artists—mostly male—came to define modern American culture while navigating the restrictions imposed by Cold War homophobia. Although Sherry’s monograph is more sociological than Corber’s, both works are driven by a similar question: how did the Lav

ender Scare and generalized homophobia affect Americans’ view of homosexuals and homosexuality? As with Corber, a paradox animates Sherry’s analysis. How did gay artists, who were frequently and publicly dismissed as pathologically and creatively inauthentic, come to be celebrated as quintessentially American? In Sherry’s concise phrasing, “How could gay men have been so important in the arts, and so defining of American identity, when America was so homophobic?” (p. 7).

Sherry provides a deceptively simple answer: “When anxieties about America’s cultural empire peaked, with artists deployed as Cold War weapons alongside astronauts and diplomats, so too did scrutiny of the queer artist. When anxieties subsided, so too did the scrutiny” (p. 1). Behind this straightforward explanation lies an engrossing account of how queer artists carried the torch of American culture during the first two decades of the Cold War. Sherry demonstrates that gay artists became central to America’s global public relations campaign, which aimed to prove that the new superpower possessed cultural capital to match its economic might and political clout. The U.S. government co-opted gay artists as a marginal group and incorporated them into its imperial and ecumenical mission. In doing so, gay artists, at least conditionally, shed their peripheral status and became integral to the country’s national defense project. The Cold War competition in the arts allowed for an uneasy truce between gay artists and a government that otherwise freely discriminated against sexual minorities. Yet, the fame many gay artists achieved is precisely what drove the panicked discourse about “sissies” being “Stalin’s atom bomb to destroy America” (p. 30).

Many Americans noisily—and often maliciously—scrutinized homosexuality long before gay liberation in the 1970s. Although gays themselves were meant to keep their mouths shut, the heterosexual majority invented salacious accounts of gay subculture and hysterical conspiracy theories. Sherry writes: “Insofar as gay men and lesbians shattered a silence on homosexuality in the 1970s, the silence was largely their own, not others” (p. 8). Like Stern’s The Grapevine, which professed to have uncovered the secret world of lesbian subculture, accounts of male homosexual deviance abounded in mass media. To Sherry’s credit, instead of condemning, he historicizes this toxic environment by reflecting on the construction of homophobia as not “static and unidirectional, but as brimming with contradictions and with the attitudinal push-and-pull—fascination, dismay, disgust, even admiration” (p. 7). America was caught in a transitional stage, enamored with its own power and vitality but aware of the restraint necessary to exercise its newfound authority. In this transitional moment, Sherry argues, popular anxieties about whether American culture was maturing sufficiently to accept new superpower burdens were displaced on queer artists, who symbolized exuberance without restraint.
Moreover, the queer artist was depicted as subverting America’s global dominance because the perceived emptiness of mass culture supposedly emanated from the unwholesomeness of homosexuals themselves.

Sherry persuasively argues that, despite encountering venomous rhetoric, gay artists enjoyed success in the first two decades of the Cold War because they promulgated a heterogeneous view of America. At the same time, the work of gay artists could hardly be compared or described as unified, because the artists’ homosexuality never entirely captured and defined either their personalities or their point of view. Herein lies one of the central paradoxes of Sherry’s book, pithily captured by journalist Jeff Weinstein, who once stated, “No, there is no such thing as a gay sensibility and yes, it has an enormous impact on our culture” (p. 7). Sherry convincingly maintains that by at least one metric gay artists could hardly be considered marginal to American institutions: “By definition, those who succeeded—who got orchestras to play their music, theaters to mount their plays, movies to do their scripts—were insiders” (p. 93). Thus, although gays could not shape public discourse about themselves, this did not mean that gay artists remained on the sidelines of either high or popular culture. Sherry provides the term “inbetween-ness” to describe this paradoxical situation (p. 103). He defines queer artists’ marginality as “partial, varied, and elusive” (p. 95). Indicatively, the “closet” terminology did not exist in the 1950s because, as Sherry argues, it did not fully describe the complexity of the queer experience. Even when the term appeared in 1961, it was not meant to describe a space that homosexuals occupied (or described themselves as occupying), but one to which the heterosexual public had relegated them.

More broadly, Sherry questions the veracity of the truism that the gay artists’ Cold War outsider status aided them in becoming more original and authentic. He exposes the fallacy underlying the idea that marginality breeds originality and, conversely, that accommodation destroys creativity. The book concludes by restating the paradox driving Sherry’s narrative: “Mid-century gay creativity occurred because of oppression, but also because oppression had limits, and for reasons having little to do with it.” As Sherry then admits, this is an untidy formula but one that liberates us from clinging to the “sad beauties presumably produced by gay artists facing oppression” (p. 238). His study provides a stimulating approach to conceptualizing early Cold War cultural politics as both restricting and enabling the development of gay identity and queer subculture.

Corber’s and Sherry’s books use different approaches to evaluate and measure the regulation of Cold War sexual systems. Although both authors show how the gay community carved a space for itself, Corber accentuates the repressive mechanism of Cold War homophobia, whereas Sherry emphasizes
the ironies and inconsistencies of the Cold War–era regulatory regime (without negating its detrimental effects). What is more, Sherry demonstrates how gay men, far from being marginal figures, became complicit tools in the creation of America’s superior position in the Cold War standoff. In this sense, Sherry’s work is clearer than Corber’s in expressing the ambiguity of the time, allowing his historical subjects the maximum of agency and leverage.

Jennifer Evans’s *Life among the Ruins: Cityscape and Sexuality in Cold War Berlin* provides a third case study that reflects on how ideas about sexuality and attitudes toward sexual practices transformed during the Cold War era. In contrast to Corber and Sherry, Evans privileges sexual experience over discourse and focuses on the practice of sexuality rather than the dynamics of sexual identity. Even more importantly, Evans emphasizes the Weimar and Nazi legacies, rather than the Cold War context, to explain the complex evolution of postwar sexual norms and customs in Berlin. In her words: “The new Berlin emerged out of the confrontation with past Berlins” (p. 152). The Cold War, although palpable and obvious in the way Berlin’s urban space functioned, did not play as formative a role in the reconstruction of the mental frameworks and legal mechanisms that governed human sexuality there. The borders themselves remained porous as locals freely moved across official demarcations until the Wall went up in August 1961, but the German authorities on either side of the divide shared a common sense of purpose in reinvigorating heteronormative institutions and the supremacy of the traditional family. What is more, the governments in both West Germany and East Germany relied on Nazi-era legal codes and precedents to reign in non-normative sexual practices. By contrast, much of the non-heteronormative segments of the population and those wishing to dodge the strictures of abstemious behavior strove to reconstitute Berlin’s Weimar past. Although the Cold War undoubtedly raised the stakes on reinstituting “healthy social mores” as a key component of reconstruction, the memories of the Weimar and Nazi eras fundamentally affected the actions and responses of both the populace and the authorities.

The two rival Cold War camps accentuated the differences between the sectors, but Evans makes clear that the line separating the two regimes remained razor-thin: “Until the building of the Wall, life on both sides of the boundary was more similar than different” (p. 66). The two Cold War foes resembled each other most in their efforts to establish a sense of order in the unruly cityscape. Policing public order stood out as one of the few issues on which bilateral cooperation was still possible, and even effective, after 1949. The two ideological rivals deployed an army of specialists—doctors, criminologists, policemen, jurists, and caseworkers—with the aim of containing the social instability unleashed by the aftermath of war. More broadly, officials in
both sectors saw deviance (sexual or otherwise) as a direct affront to the states’ reconstruction efforts. In an episode that characterized the power, desperation, and idiocy of the government’s efforts to regulate “sexual criminality,” Evans describes how 650 women were rounded up from a ballroom, taken to a nearby hospital, and compelled to undergo pelvic exams—all with the quixotic aim of containing the spread of venereal disease. Although only 34 of the women (roughly 5 percent) were diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection, the local authorities justified their actions on legal and health grounds (p. 79). This incident happened in West Berlin, but Evans makes clear that it could just as easily have occurred in the east. Both sectors prized rules and laws above all else.

This drive for law and order, however, was often undermined by the brutality that Soviet and U.S. soldiers inflicted on the women of Berlin. In Evans’s account the city streets emerge as a site where both American and Soviet soldiers harassed, attacked, raped, and murdered Berlin’s female population both in broad daylight and under the cover of darkness, in claustrophobic alleyways as well as wide boulevards. In March 1946, for instance, a group of soldiers gang-raped a heavily pregnant woman in a well-trafficked boulevard despite the many passersby and the nearby presence of a U.S. military police detachment. Even those who supposedly ensured public order—on either side of the ideological divide—continued to traumatize a defeated and defenseless population. For hundreds of Berlin women, postwar lawlessness embodied the dark side of shrinking moral and ethical limitations on sexual conduct. For hundreds of others, sexual experience came untethered from the constraints of marital fealty and procreative duty, becoming instead, through the sale of their own flesh, a humiliating necessity for survival.

For thousands of women, the urban wilderness mirrored the moral wasteland of postwar Berlin. For those desiring non-normative sexual expression the obliterated cityscape provided “much-needed avenues of resistance” (p. 123). In accentuating this group’s resistance to the newly emerging regulatory systems, Evans presents a Berlin in which the constant and dynamic human traffic belied the idea of separation, political or otherwise. As Evans notes: “Sector borders were doggedly policed, but for all the pretense of governance and control, ultimately, they were of little importance, up until the building of the Wall, as a host of Berliners crisscrossed their way across the inner boundary for work by day and pleasure by night” (p. 161). In an evocative chapter examining the microcosms of the city’s train stations, Evans shows how male and female prostitutes transcended the East-West demarcation, as the trade in flesh remained tethered to the city’s transit network.

Adolescent hustlers and their adult Johns posed major headaches for police enforcement, especially because the two sectors had different legal and ad-
judication standards. The division of the city often enabled, rather than restricted, a whole range of taboo sexual behaviors, which both regimes feared would undermine state-approved efforts to reconstitute the boundaries of respectability and decorum. Even though Berlin operated under two separate city governments and two independent states, the free crossing of borders for sexual liaisons, especially of the same-sex variety, underscores that “political division had not yet imprinted itself on citizens, who still conceived of the city according to their own compasses” (p. 129). Moreover, the laws that were aimed at bolstering the traditional family and heteronormative monogamous marriage also led to a return of the kind of policing that echoed the city’s Nazi past. As Evans points out: “While the collapse of the Reich set in motion changes in the process of identifying homosexual transgressions, Nazi-era attitudes about the protection of youth continued to influence the regulation of male prostitution in both Germanies” (p. 126). The evolution of nighttime bars, cafes, and clubs indicated, however, that the results authorities achieved could not entirely match their repressive rhetoric. The sexual freedom Weimar Berlin had been known for reconstituted itself, even if only partially, in the western part of town. Evans rightly notes that “the physical city and the memories it engendered played a constitutive role not simply in the reconstruction of Berlin’s gloriously transgressive past, but in the very conceptualization of its future as well” (p. 152).

In dialogue with Sherry’s and Corber’s monographs, Evans’s study even more prominently demonstrates how the Cold War—as a cultural and moral system—operated across time and space. These three works, taken together and evaluated alongside other scholarship on Cold War–era gender and sexuality, show that the superpower rivalry demarcated lines and established regulatory frameworks that profoundly affected national trends and individual histories. Equally pronounced, however, is the perspective that borders and other regulatory systems backfired, subverted their intended function, or simply produced minimal results. Corber, Sherry, and Evans interpret the spectrum of oppression differently, and their divergent interpretations are a testimony to the variety of methodological approaches and foci of analysis the field has developed to date. This diversity of interests and methods is precisely what has kept the study of Cold War–era gender and sexuality dynamic and fresh.

Now that a critical mass of scholarship dealing with Cold War gender and sexualities exists, this might be an opportune time to think about this subfield in a comparative and transnational fashion. The major obstacle to this task remains the dearth of works dealing with the history of sexualities in the Soviet-bloc countries. Whereas historians of the United States and Western Europe have been more prolific in investigating social and cultural histo-
ries as they relate to the Cold War, very few scholars focusing on Soviet and East European history have analyzed the issue of Cold War-era sexuality to an equal degree. Although this situation partly has to do with the availability of sources and the difficulty of working in former East-bloc archives, methodological inventiveness and resourcefulness would allow for a truly transnational moment in the study of Cold War sexuality.